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13 February 1967

BACKSTOPPER FOR BRIEFINGS

ROLLING THUNDER CASUALTIES

I. We have been making periodic estimates, on a basis which we consider sound, of the number of casualties which have probably resulted from bombing attacks on North Vietnam in 1965 and 1966.

A. These are derived from thorough and careful analysis of all available pertinent intelligence. The evidence includes [REDACTED] of official North Vietnamese reports, letters written by North Vietnamese to friends and relatives abroad, information from other intelligence operations, and photographic reconnaissance before and after the attacks.

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1. Bomb damage assessment in previous wars has established a set of factors by which we can correlate the type of structure or other target, the extent of visible damage, and the weight and type of ordnance dropped, in order to arrive at a fairly reliable estimate.

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B. On the basis of these techniques and inputs, we estimate that the bombing missions over North Vietnam resulted in about 13,200 casualties, of whom some 6,000 were civilians. The total would comprise about half fatalities, half wounded.

C. Preliminary estimates for 1966 indicate a range of 22,500 to 24,900 casualties. In 1966, the estimated fatality portion dropped from 50 to 40 percent, but the proportion listed as civilian went up from 45 percent to 80 percent.

1. In other words, the preliminary 1966 estimate shows 7,500 to 8,000 civilians killed, and another 11,500 to 12,000 wounded.

D. The North Vietnamese, of course, are doing their best to give the impression that all of the casualties were women and children.

1. In point of fact, almost 95 percent of the estimated civilian casualties resulted from armed reconnaissance missions, rather than from attacks on the JCS list of fixed targets.

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2. That means that the bulk of these casualties were civilians working at military targets or engaged in maintenance and operation of the logistics system --truck drivers, barge crews, or repair gangs on bridges, rail lines, and highways.

E. To put the estimate in proper perspective, I should note that in each year the total casualty figure works out to about one casualty per attack mission, which is remarkably low.

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